Conversations with Don DeLillo

Edited by Thomas DePietro

University Press of Mississippi
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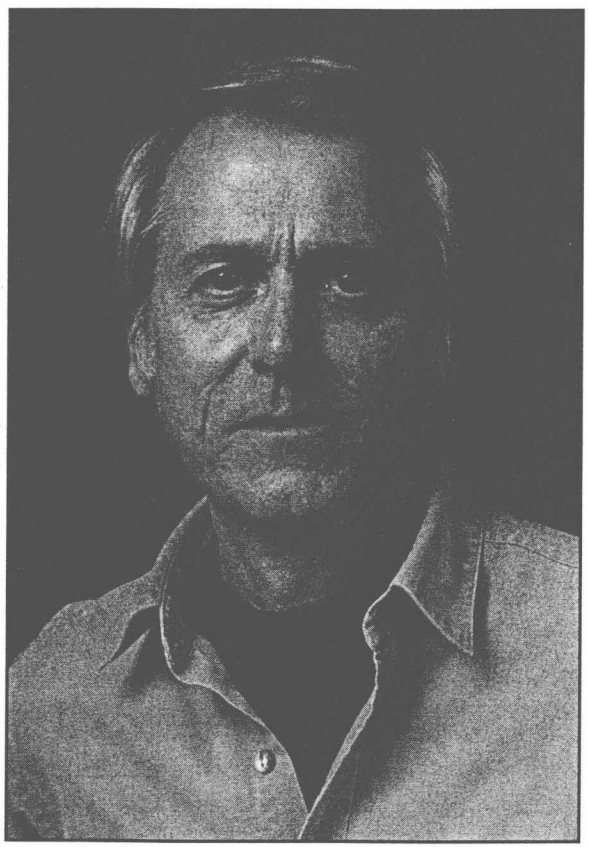

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Books by Don DeLillo

Americana. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1971.
End Zone. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1972.
Great Jones Street. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973.
Ratner's Star. New York: Knopf, 1976.
Players. New York: Knopf, 1977.
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The Names. New York: Knopf, 1982.
White Noise. New York: Viking, 1985.
The Day Room. New York: Knopf, 1987.
Libra. New York: Viking, 1988.
Mao II. New York: Viking, 1991.
Underworld New York: Scribner, 1997.
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Introduction

Don DeLillo's widely-performed play *Valparaiso* (1999) takes satirical aim at the motives of interviewers. An Oprah-like TV host asks a guest, "What are you hiding in your heart?" The man replies: "There's nothing I haven't openly spoken about. I've answered every question. I've answered some questions seventy, eighty, ninety times. I've answered in the same words every time. I do the same thoughtful pauses in the exact same places. We're dealing with the important things here." Given Don DeLillo's well-known aversion to discussing himself or his own work, it's easy to imagine that the media circus of *Valparaiso*, in which a simple confusion of place names turns a hapless businessman into an accidental celebrity, speaks to the author's own experiences on the firing line. As one interviewer in the play suggests, "Everything is the interview."

Valparaiso, coming on the heels of DeLillo's celebrated novel *Underworld* (1997), no doubt reflected its author's exhaustion after the most extensive publicity campaign of his career. But to read it autobiographically would be an oversimplification, since DeLillo's clever drama concerns much more than the absurdity of so-called reality television and the poetry found in the babble of airline announcements. And, besides, DeLillo's attitude towards the commerce of books and the relentlessness of interviewers hasn't changed over the years. As he remarked to a reporter from *The Washington Post*: "Interviewers want to feel that they're cracking a barrier that doesn't exist. I've been called 'reclusive' a hundred times and I'm not even remotely in that category. But people want to believe this because it satisfies some romantic conception of what a dedicated writer is and how he ought to live. 'I know you never do interviews.' They say that to me all the time. 'But here I am' is my stock reply."[1]

Sure enough, DeLillo has submitted himself to numerous interviewers from all sorts of magazines and journals, and the best, spanning some twenty years, are collected here. The most recent continue to claim that their subject is a "cipher," with a "cryptic air"; he's "enigmatic," "invisible," and "all business." Of course, DeLillo encourages some of these characterizations. When

he emerged to accept his American Book Award for *White Noise* in 1985, he addressed the audience at the New York Public Library saying, "I'm sorry I couldn't be here tonight," and sat down.

To be sure, Don DeLillo is a private man who for most of his distinguished career has avoided the typical blandishments of success: no teaching, no writing conferences, no judges' panels. But since his first interview (Thomas LeClair) in 1982, DeLillo has been hiding in plain sight. He makes himself available when the occasion arises, and lately he has begun to read from his work in public. Television, though, continues to represent not just the kind of celebrity DeLillo spurns, but also the consumerist vision he so trenchantly explores in his fiction. The very first response in that first sit-down with LeClair becomes the theme for all future inquisitors. When LeClair asks why DeLillo offers so little biographical information on his dust jackets, he replies (paraphrasing one of his favorite authors, James Joyce): "Silence, exile, cunning, and so on. It's my nature to keep quiet about most things."

DeLillo talked to LeClair after having already published six novels to great critical acclaim, and he would submit to just one more interview (Harris, 1982) before the wider success of *White Noise* in 1985. The book that forced him further into the open is *Libra* (1988), his fact-based account of Lee Harvey Oswald and the assassination of President Kennedy (see, in particular, Arensberg, Connolly, Goldstein, and DeCurtis). Unlike E. L. Doctorow or Robert Coover, DeLillo felt compelled to make clear the distinctions between fact and fiction in the novel, to remain "faithful to what we know of history." Oswald, who appears in earlier (and later) DeLillo novels, remains for him a classic loner and outsider, part of the underground history of our times. In many interviews, DeLillo returns not just to his interpretation of these events, but to the elaborate research that went into his recreation of them: the hours poring over the complete Warren Report, the field trips to Dallas, and his own coincidental connection to Oswald (they both lived nearby in the Bronx at one point).

This concern with the "power of history" and the need to distinguish fact from fancy arise again with *Underworld*, a masterly and massive novel that also blends the real and imagined. As DeLillo tells his interviewers (Howard, Remnick, Echlin), it all began with some fortuitous research linking a famous baseball game and nuclear weapons. What some critics at the time didn't seem to realize is that many of the wilder events in the novel are true. (Yes, Frank Sinatra, J. Edgar Hoover, Toots Shor, and Jackie Gleason all attended

together the famous Giants-Dodgers playoff game in 1951, to cite just one of these improbable facts). On the other hand, DeLillo tells us, he delighted in inventing the outrageous monologues he puts in the mouth of Lenny Bruce, one of the Cold War's underground prophets.

Underworld also found DeLillo in the "spirit of cooperation" with his publishers who, after all, had supposedly paid a huge sum for the novel. Money, promotional budgets, the business of books—DeLillo clearly has no interest in discussing these topics and prefers the old-fashioned notion that the writer writes, and the publisher sells. Numerous interviewers, especially those who came out of the woodwork with DeLillo's ascent into bestsellerdom with *Libra* and *Underworld*, strayed far from aesthetic questions. Suddenly, journalists wanted to know what he thought about all sorts of cultural and political matters. But despite his obvious interest in specific social and cultural events, DeLillo reminds his interviewers that he is after all a novelist, committed to the imagination and the voice of the individual. To their dismay, as well as to the delight of his few unsympathetic critics, DeLillo's characters do not speak for him. He sees his work as a mystery, born of a street-level love of language and a sensitivity to images.

Volumes in the Literary Conversations Series reprint interviews in their entirety in order to maintain their scholarly integrity, which leads to some inevitable repetition. In DeLillo's case, these repetitions are more prevalent simply because he often repeats himself and even quotes himself. Of course, he selects his words carefully, as one would expect of a novelist who makes language the very subject of his work. He stays on point at all times and controls the information about himself. As he told the *Washington Post*, "Once they start describing your house and your back yard, you're exposed in a curious way." The early interviews added little to the bare outline of DeLillo's life: date and place of birth, education, marriage. But over time, more facts of his life have emerged, and he has even reflected on some of their significance. His Catholic education, once simply noted by him, later explains his "failed" asceticism and his sense of the mystical. His Bronx, Italian-American background, which he barely discusses in early interviews, figures largely in the urban landscapes of *Underworld*, as it does in his sense of language and character. Hence, he refers to them more frequently in later profiles. Conversely, he argues that his experience as an advertising writer and his childhood reading explain little in his career. So, both remain non-starters throughout the interviews here.

DeLillo continually parries questions about literary and philosophical influences, even though his work seems to invoke an encyclopedia of intellectual and cultural history. A passing reference to reading Wittgenstein, and unsurprising acknowledgments of Joyce, Nabokov, Melville, and Pynchon are about all that DeLillo offers in this regard. The greater influences stem from purveyors of images: photographers, painters, and filmmakers. DeLillo refers time and again to his youthful encounters with New Wave cinema, especially Godard, and the abstract expressionist painters. The other much discussed influence is jazz, which, according to DeLillo, provided the musical background to his development as an artist; it's a music, after all, that celebrates individual expression, especially in the solo-driven post-bop of his youth.

Above all, DeLillo makes clear his greatest inspiration: New York City, whose streets he walks, whose subways he travels, whose inhabitants he overhears. The prescient social criticism in his novels derives not from some ideological agenda but from plain observation; DeLillo, despite what some of his adulatory critics suggest, is a realist, with the sensitivity of a recording angel and the craft of a consummate artist. Like many modern writers, DeLillo in his earlier interviews points us away from the teller to the tale. But over time, he explicates some of his intentions. If *Libra* required some explanation concerning its factuality, *Mao II* (1991) finds him explaining, among other things, its title, which comes from Andy Warhol's painting of Mao. As just another of his many celebrity portraits in the same silk-screened style, Warhol's *Mao* detaches itself from the historical record, which is exactly the sort of celebrity treatment DeLillo considers endemic to our time. It doesn't matter what you've achieved (or how many you've killed), you're a star.

As DeLillo makes clear in a number of interviews, *Mao II* also proposes some challenging ideas about the role of the novelist in our hype-driven culture. In words that seem prophetic (or irresponsible, depending on your point of view), DeLillo argues that novelists in our day have been supplanted by terrorists, as individuals who can alter our consciousness. Which is not to say that the novel has become irrelevant (or that we should become terrorists). What DeLillo means is that the terrorist captures our attention in a way that writers once did, that nonfictional documents, news reports, and photos, endlessly repeated on television, are at once potent and then sapped of their meaning.

Not an idle chatterer by any stretch of the imagination, DeLillo nevertheless comes alive with his favorite subject: baseball. In one of the most enjoyable interviews collected here, David Firestone of the *New York Times* had the clever idea to ask DeLillo about Mark McGwire's record-breaking home-run in 1998. While he admired McGwire's homage to Roger Maris (whose record he broke), DeLillo feared, not surprisingly, the endless repetition of the historic moment on television—a feature of modern media that continues to form the center of his critique.

A number of interviews focus on DeLillo's less-heralded work in the theater, work that forces him out of his solitary life as a novelist and into the collaborative world of the stage. As a writer of fiction in total control of his language, the experience of theatrical revision seems to come as a welcome alternative, and DeLillo's plays demonstrate a profound theatricality as a result. The three-dimensionality of the stage steers him away from psychological portraiture. Dialogue exists as it's filtered through an actor's voice. All of which no doubt offers a brave new world to this quintessential loner, a writer who tells many interviewers about his daily routine and the amount of time he spends staring quietly out his window. Theatrical productions always find DeLillo willing to talk, and what he has to say, whether it's about *The Day Room* or *Valparaiso*, or *The Mystery at the Middle of Ordinary Life*, is essentially the same: that DeLillo picks his genres by instinct, not design. Much in the way that the language of his books changes with each subject, his plays allow him to explore the mysteries of identity, since the characters change with each performance. Samuel Beckett of course is the prevailing spirit here, and he also once put off interviewers with the simple remark that he had "no views to inter."

DeLillo time and again rehearses his work habits—the hours at his desk punctuated by a midday run—and his devotion to his manual typewriter. The latter has actually grown in significance as he considers its influence on his composition, the shape of the words on the page, and the sounds they invoke. Many interviewers probe DeLillo for the secrets to his artistic triumph, but he is remarkably straightforward in response. Some journalists (not included here), especially after his greater fame with *Underworld*, load for bear, and try to take him down with snide remarks about his reticence. Or worse, they quote unfavorable reviews to him. DeLillo, always the gentleman, deflects these inquisitors with his typical aplomb, dismissing one with the apposite remark: "We've run out of conversation, haven't we?" So expect little

of gossip value in these seventeen interviews: no rivalries are revealed, no axes ground. Just honest conversation from a very private man, an Italian-American after all who adheres to the old tribal notion of *omerta*—the code of silence that gains new significance when re-imagined by an artist struggling with the contradictions of self-expression.[2]

I want to thank, first of all, Dorothy Heyl, whose support means everything. Others who've provided topnotch assistance: Regina DePietro, Bill Hessberg, Mindi Hockenberry, and Neil Montone. This book makes no sense without Don DeLillo himself, whose words these mostly are.

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Notes

1. David Streitfeld. "Don DeLillo's Gloomy Muse," *Washington Post*, 14 May 1992, p. C-1.
2. Of great help to all DeLillo scholars and readers are two well-maintained web-sites: The Don DeLillo Society site, edited by Philip Nel; and *Don DeLillo's America*, run by Curt Gardner.

Chronology

1936	November 20th, born in the Bronx, New York, near Arthur Avenue, a largely Italian-American neighborhood.
1954	Graduated from Cardinal Hayes High School, a Catholic boys school in the Bronx.
1958	Attains B.A. in communication arts from Fordham University, also in the Bronx.
1959	Works as copywriter for Ogilvy & Mather.
1960	Publishes first story, "The River Jordan," in *Epoch*, the literary magazine at Cornell University.
1962	"Take the 'A' Train" appears in *Epoch*, and other stories appear throughout the decade in *The Kenyon Review* and *The Carolina Quarterly*.
1971	First novel, *Americana*, appears as well as his first story in *Esquire*.
1972	Publishes *End Zone* and in *Sports Illustrated*.
1973	*Great Jones Street* solidifies his reputation among critics.
1975	Marries Barbara Bennett, from Texas, a banker who eventually becomes a landscape designer.
1976	Publishes *Ratner's Star*.
1977	*Players* appears.
1978	Publishes *Running Dog*.
1979	First play appears in literary magazine, and he receives Guggenheim fellowship, which allows him to travel to Greece.
1980	*Amazons*, a fictional memoir of the first female professional hockey player, appears under the pseudonym "Cleo Birdwell."
1982	Publishes *The Names* and moves to the suburbs of New York City.
1983	Contributes an essay on the assassination of John Kennedy to *Rolling Stone*.
1984	Receives Award in Literature from the American Academy of Arts and Letters.

1985 *White Noise* appears and DeLillo reaches his widest audience to date; the book wins the American Book Award for best novel.
1986 *The Day Room* is his first play to be performed, at the American Repertory Theater in Cambridge, Massachusetts.
1987 *The Day Room* opens at the Manhattan Theater Club and is published in book form.
1988 *Libra*, his first best-seller, wins the Irish Times-Aer Lingus International Fiction Prize, is chosen for the Book-of-the-Month Club, and nominated for the American Book Award.
1990 A short play, *The Rapture of the Athlete Assumed into Heaven*, is performed in Cambridge and appears in both *The Quarterly* and *Harper's*.
1991 *Mao II* appears and wins the PEN/Faulkner Award for fiction.
1997 *Underworld* appears to international acclaim, is nominated for many awards, and wins the Jerusalem Prize two years later. He is the first American to win this award for work that "expresses the theme of freedom of the individual in society." Previous winners include Milan Kundera, V. S. Naipaul, and Jorge Louis Borges.
1999 *Valparaiso* premieres at the American Repertory Theater and comes out in book form.
2000 Receives the William Dean Howells Medal of the American Academy and Institute of Arts and Letters.
2001 Publishes *The Body Artist*. DeLillo's works by now are translated into Italian, German, French, Japanese, Danish, and Polish.
2003 Publishes *Cosmopolis* and a few nonfiction essays on the movies, a drawing by Louise Nevelson, and William Gaddis.
2004 *Valparaiso* is performed in many cities across the country.

Conversations with Don DeLillo

An Interview with Don DeLillo

Thomas LeClair / 1982

From *Contemporary Literature*, 23, no. 1, pp. 19–31.

Of American novelists who began publishing in the '70s, Don DeLillo is one of the most prolific. He is also one of the most elusive. While his novels are located in America's fascinations—entertainment, big-time sport, intrigue—they are written with a detachment that causes reviewers to praise him for very different, sometimes contradictory intentions. The books are elusive because, for DeLillo, fiction draws its power from and moves toward mystery. Elusive, too, because DeLillo has not joined the literary auxiliary: he does not sit on panels, appear on television, judge contests, review books, or teach creative writing. He travels and writes.

DeLillo agreed to do this interview from what he thought was the safe distance of Greece. When I managed to get to Athens in September, 1979, and not long after I met him, he handed me a business card engraved with his name and "I don't want to talk about it." He does not like to discuss his work, but he is a witty conversationalist, an informed and generous guide, invaluable in Greek taxis and restaurants. At forty-three, DeLillo in his jeans and sneakers has the look of a just-retired athlete. He walks Athens' crowded streets like a linebacker, on his toes, eyes shifting, watching for crazed drivers among the merely reckless. When we taped in his apartment near Mt. Lycabetus, he spoke quietly and slowly, in a slight New York accent, searching for the precision he insists upon in his fiction. One soon understands from his uninflected tone, which sounds more like thought than talk, and from the silences between his short declarative sentences that Don DeLillo's elusiveness comes naturally, necessarily, from his concern with what he quotes Hermann Broch as calling "the word beyond speech."

DeLillo's books offer a precise and thorough anthropology of the present, an account of our kinship in myths, media, and conspiracies. His first novel, *Americana* (1971), begins in the television industry and moves cross country

searching for relief from the image. The heroes of *End Zone* (1972) and *Great Jones Street* (1973) are football and rock stars trying to work free of their public mythologies. In *Players* (1977) and *Running Dog* (1978), DeLillo writes about up-to-date conspiracies prompted by the appeal of terrorism and pornography. The book DeLillo considers his best is *Ratner's Star* (1976), where he combines elements of children's literature, science fiction, and mathematics to create a conceptual monster. Like his more realistic fictions, *Ratner's Star* uses its bulk and abstraction to imply all that cannot be spoken in characters, words, and numbers.

—*Tom LeClair*

LeClair: Why do reference books give only your date of birth and the publication dates of your books?
DeLillo: Silence, exile, cunning, and so on. It's my nature to keep quiet about most things. Even the ideas in my work. When you try to unravel something you've written, you belittle it in a way. It was created as a mystery, in part. Here is a new map of the world; it is seven shades of blue. If you're able to be straightforward and penetrating about this invention of yours, it's almost as though you're saying it wasn't altogether necessary. The sources weren't deep enough. Maybe this view is overrefined and too personal. But I think it helps explain why some writers are unable or unwilling to discuss their work. There's an element of tampering. And there's a crossover that can be difficult to make. What you write, what you say about it. The vocabularies don't match. It's hard to correspond to reality, to talk sensibly about an idea or a theme that originates in a writer's desire to restructure reality.

But here I am, talking.

LeClair: Of your six novels, which one is closest to your own experience?
DeLillo: *Americana*, probably, in the sense that I drew material more directly from people and situations I knew firsthand. I was hurling things at the page. At the time I lived in a small apartment with no stove and the refrigerator in the bathroom and I thought first novels written under these circumstances ought to be novels in which great chunks of experience are hurled at the page. So that's what I did. The original manuscript was higher than my radio.

It's not an autobiographical novel. But I did use many things I'd seen, heard, knew about.

LeClair: Your work seems to me quite different in tone and in language from most contemporary fiction. I wondered if you felt that you were onto something different.
DeLillo: When I was about halfway through *Americana*, which took roughly four years to do, it occurred to me almost in a flash that I was a writer. Whatever tentativeness I'd felt about the book dropped away. I finished it in a spirit of getting a difficult, unwieldy thing out of the way, in a spirit of having proved certain things to myself. With *End Zone* I felt I was doing something easier and looser. I was working closer to my instincts. I paced things differently. Balances became important, starts and stops. I approached certain things from unusual angles, I think. Some of the characters have a made-up nature. They are pieces of jargon. They engage in wars of jargon with each other. There is a mechanical element, a kind of fragmented self-consciousness. I took this further in *Ratner's Star*, where characters don't just open their mouths to say hello. They have to make the action part of the remark. "My mouth says hello." "My ears hear." The characters are words on paper. This isn't necessarily true of the other books. *End Zone* and *Ratner's Star* are books of games, books in which fiction itself is a sort of game.

My work also grew more precise. I began to study things more, disassemble them. Possibly what I was studying was ways to use the language. It may be the case that with *End Zone* I began to suspect that language was a subject as well as an instrument in my work, although I'd find it hard to say in what ways exactly.

LeClair: Games are important in your fiction. Were they an early interest?
DeLillo: The games I've written about have more to do with rules and boundaries than with the freewheeling street games I played when I was growing up. People whose lives are not clearly shaped or marked off may feel a deep need for rules of some kind. People leading lives of almost total freedom and possibility may secretly crave rules and boundaries, some kind of control in their lives. Most games are carefully structured. They satisfy a sense of order and they even have an element of dignity about them. In *Ratner's Star* someone says, "Strict rules add dignity to a game." There are many games in *Ratner's Star*, and the book is full of adults acting like children—which is another reason why people play games, of course.

In *Running Dog*, Selvy is playing a game when he leads his pursuers in a straight line to southwest Texas, where he knows they'll try to kill him. In *End*

Zone, one of the games is football. There are others. Games provide a frame in which we can try to be perfect. Within sixty-minute limits or one-hundred-yard limits or the limits of a game board, we can look for perfect moments or perfect structures. In my fiction I think this search sometimes turns out to be a cruel delusion.

In *Players*, the rules become almost metaphysical. They involve inner restrictions. There's some of that in *Running Dog* as well. Empty landscapes seem to inspire games.

LeClair: Your third novel, *Great Jones Street*, is set in the empty landscape of its title. How did you happen to write about a rock star?
DeLillo: It's a game at the far edge. It's an extreme situation. I think rock is a music of loneliness and isolation. The Doors work very well at the beginning of the film *Apocalypse Now*. A man with a half-shattered mind, alone in a rented room. Noise, electricity, excess, Vietnam—all these things are tied together in *Great Jones Street*, and a certain tension is drawn out of the hero's silence, his withdrawal. Bucky Wunderlick's music moves from political involvement to extreme self-awareness to childlike babbling.

LeClair: Perhaps because of the game element, reviewers of your fiction have a hard time locating your attitudes toward your characters.
DeLillo: My attitudes aren't directed toward characters at all. I don't feel sympathetic toward some characters, unsympathetic toward others. I don't love some characters, feel contempt for others. They have attitudes; I don't.

Some people may have felt I disliked Pammy and Lyle in *Players*. Not true. I think these two characters are more typical of contemporary Americans than people want to believe. Lyle is an intelligent, high-strung, spiritually undernourished person. Pammy is more humane. She is also more prone to be affected by the shallow ideas drifting through her world, and she is constantly afraid. I can talk about them this way, but I can't talk about them as people I love or hate. They're people I recognize.

What writing means to me is trying to make interesting, clear, beautiful language. Working at sentences and rhythms is probably the most satisfying thing I do as a writer. I think after a while a writer can begin to know himself through his language. He sees someone or something reflected back at him

from these constructions. Over the years it's possible for a writer to shape himself as a human being through the language he uses. I think written language, fiction, goes that deep. He not only sees himself but begins to make himself or remake himself. Of course, this is mysterious and subjective territory.

Writing also means trying to advance the art. Fiction hasn't quite been filled in or done in or worked out. We make our small leaps. This is the reason for the introduction to *Players*. All the main characters, seven of them, are introduced in an abstract way. They don't have names. Their connections to each other are not clear in all cases. They're on an airplane, watching a movie, but all the other seats are empty. They're isolated, above the story, waiting to be named. It's a kind of model-building. It's the novel in miniature. We can call it pure fiction in the sense that the characters have been momentarily separated from the storytelling apparatus. They're still ideas, vague shapes.

LeClair: What do you think of the renewed interest in "moral fiction"? Anthony Burgess wrote that the term "evil" has no meaning in *Running Dog*. Another reviewer complained that the book was reductive.
DeLillo: Moll Robbins is the weathervane for all the avarice in the book, the maneuverings for power. Her own imperfections may frustrate the reader who is looking for a moral center. The evil, or whatever we call it, is there. We can't position these acts and attitudes around a nineteenth-century heroine. They float in a particular social and cultural medium. A modern American medium. Half-heartedness and indifference are very much to the point. People tend to walk away from their own conspiracies. Hitler is a fatigued and defeated man dressed up like Charlie Chaplin.

I'd say the style and language reflect the landscape more than they reflect the writer's state of mind. The bareness is really the bareness and starkness of lower Manhattan and southwest Texas. And since the book is essentially a thriller, I felt the prose should be pared down. But the reductiveness belongs to character and setting, not to the author's view of things. The author was amused, by and large. The author thought most of the characters were damned funny.

Glen Selvy, who was not one of the funny ones, believes that choice is a subtle form of disease. He feels he has to commit what is in effect a ritual suicide. He is leaving behind whatever is difficult about life, whatever is

complicated. I try to understand what makes Selvy go. I don't patronize him or feel contempt for him because he leads a life that is simplified to an extreme degree. Selvy feels that knowing his weapons, how to take them apart and put them back together, is a form of self-respect. He finds his truth in violence. He is an adept of violence, a semi-mystic.

LeClair: Is this the case with many of your main characters? They withdraw, reduce their relations, empty out, discipline themselves.
DeLillo: I think they see freedom and possibility as being too remote from what they perceive existence to mean. They feel instinctively that there's a certain struggle, a solitude they have to confront. The landscape is silent, whether it's a desert, a small room, a hole in the ground. The voice you have to answer is your own voice. In *End Zone*, Gary Harkness stops eating and drinking in the last paragraph. He goes on a hunger strike. He isn't protesting anything or reacting to anything specific. He is paring things down. He is struggling, trying to face something he felt had to be faced. Something nameless. I thought this was interesting. I couldn't give a name to it. He just stops eating. He refuses to eat.

LeClair: In *End Zone* you have a character taking a college course in "the untellable." That's not entirely facetious, is it?
DeLillo: I do wonder if there is something we haven't come across. Is there another, clearer language? Will we speak it and hear it when we die? Did we know it before we were born? If there are life forms in other galaxies, how do they communicate? What do they sound like?

The "untellable" points to the limitations of language. Is there something we haven't discovered about speech? Is there more? Maybe this is why there's so much babbling in my books. Babbling can be frustrated speech, or it can be a purer form, an alternate speech. I wrote a short story that ends with two babies babbling at each other in a car. This was something I'd seen and heard, and it was a dazzling and unforgettable scene. I felt these babies *knew* something. They were talking, they were listening, they were *commenting*, and above and beyond it all they were taking an immense pleasure in the exchange.

Glossolalia is interesting because it suggests there's another way to speak, there's a very different language lurking somewhere in the brain.

LeClair: Are you interested in specialized language?
DeLillo: Specialized languages can be very beautiful. Mysterious and precise at the same time. In *Ratner's Star* there's a dictionary definition of the word "cosine" that illustrates this, I think. Mathematics and astronomy are full of beautiful nomenclature. Science in general has given us a new language to draw from. Some writers shrink from this. Science is guilty; the language of science is tainted by horror and destruction. To me, science is a source of new names, new connections between people and the world. Rilke said we had to rename the world. Renaming suggests an innocence and a rebirth. Some words adapt, and these are the ones we use in our new world.

Then there is jargon, which I associate with television for some reason. The one was invented to deliver the other. But I'm interested in the way people talk, jargon or not. The original idea for *Players* was based on what could be called the intimacy of language. What people who live together really sound like. Pammy and Lyle were to address each other in the private language they'd constructed over years of living together. Unfinished sentences, childlike babbling, animal noises, foreign accents, ethnic dialects, mimicry, all of that. It's as though language is something we wear. The more we know someone, the easier it is to undress, to become childlike. But the idea got sidetracked, and only fragments survive in the finished book.

LeClair: Would you name some writers with whom you have affinities?
DeLillo: This is the great bar mitzvah question. Probably the movies of Jean-Luc Godard had a more immediate effect on my early work than anything I'd ever read. Movies in general may be the not-so-hidden influence on a lot of modern writing, although the attraction has waned, I think. The strong image, the short ambiguous scene, the dream sense of some movies, the artificiality, the arbitrary choices of some directors, the cutting and editing. The power of images. This is something I kept thinking about when I was writing *Americana*. This power had another effect. It caused people to walk around all day saying, "Movies can do *so much*." It's movies in part that seduced people into thinking the novel was dead. The power of the film image seemed to be overwhelming our little world of print. Film could do so much. Print could only trot across the page. But movies and novels are too closely related to work according to shifting proportions. If the novel dies, movies will die with it.

The books I remember and come back to seem to be ones that demonstrate the possibilities of fiction. *Pale Fire, Ulysses, The Death of Virgil, Under the Volcano, The Sound and the Fury*—these come to mind. There's a drive and a daring that go beyond technical invention. I think it's right to call it a life-drive even though these books deal at times very directly with death. No optimism, no pessimism. No homesickness for lost values or for the way fiction used to be written. These books open out onto some larger mystery. I don't know what to call it. Maybe Hermann Broch would call it "the word beyond speech."

LeClair: There's an allusion to Wittgenstein in *End Zone*. Do you find something important in his work?
DeLillo: I've read parts of the *Tractatus*, but I have no formal training in mathematical logic and I couldn't say a thing about the technical aspects of the book. I like the way he uses the language. Even in translation, it's very evocative. It's like reading Martian. The language is mysteriously simple and self-assured. It suggests without the slightest arrogance that there's no alternative to these remarks. The statements are machine tooled. Wittgenstein is the language of outer space, a very precise race of people.

LeClair: There are references to Zen in most of your books. Would you consider it an influence on your work?
DeLillo: I may have used the word several times, but I think only in *Americana* is there any kind of extended reference, and it has more to do with people playing at Eastern religion than anything else. I know very little about Zen. I'm interested in religion as a discipline and a spectacle, as something that drives people to extreme behavior. Noble, violent, depressing, beautiful. Being raised as a Catholic was interesting because the ritual had elements of art to it and it prompted feelings that art sometimes draws out of us. I think I reacted to it the way I react today to theater. Sometimes it was awesome; sometimes it was funny. High funeral masses were a little of both, and they're among my warmest childhood memories.

LeClair: Are you interested in mathematics for the same reasons?
DeLillo: I started reading mathematics because I wanted a fresh view of the world. I wanted to immerse myself in something as remote as possible from my own interests and my own work. I became fascinated and ended up

writing a novel and then a play about mathematicians. Aside from everything else, pure mathematics is a kind of secret knowledge. It's carried on almost totally outside the main currents of thought. It's a language almost no one speaks. In *Ratner's Star* I tried to weave this secret life of mankind into the action of the book in the form of a history of mathematics, a cult history, the names of the leaders kept secret until the second half of the book, the mirror image, when the names appear in reverse order. This purest of sciences brings out a religious feeling in people. Numbers in particular have always had a mystical appeal. Numbers work in such surprising ways it's hard not to feel a sense of mystery and wonder.

LeClair: Do you consider *Ratner's Star* to be your best book?
DeLillo: We're supposed to say the one I'm doing now is my best book. Otherwise, *Ratner's Star*, yes.

LeClair: What were some of the influences on and intentions of *Ratner's Star*?
DeLillo: There's a structural model, the Alice books of Lewis Carroll. The headings of the two parts—"Adventures" and "Reflections"—refer to *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*. The connection, as I say, is structural. It involves format, not characters or themes or story except in the loosest sense. It works from the particular to the general. What is real in *Alice* becomes an abstraction in *Ratner's Star*. The rabbit hole of Chapter One, for instance, becomes "substratum"—early or underground mathematics. There is also a kind of guiding spirit. This is Pythagoras. The mathematician-mystic. The whole book is informed by this link or opposition, however you see it, and the characters keep bouncing between science and superstition.

I was trying to produce a book that would be naked structure. The structure would be the book and vice versa. I wanted the book to become what it was about. Abstract structures and connective patterns. A piece of mathematics, in short. To do this I felt I had to reduce the importance of people. The people had to play a role subservient to pattern, form, and so on. This is difficult, of course, for all concerned, but I believed I was doing something new and was willing to take the risk. A book that is really all outline. My notes for the book interest me almost as much as the book does. This is an incriminating remark, but there you are.

I hadn't started out to do this. All I had in mind was a fourteen-year-old mathematical genius who is asked to decipher a message from outer space. Things started happening to this simple idea. Connections led to other connections. I began to find things I didn't know I was looking for. Mathematics led to science fiction. Logic led to babbling. Language led to games. Games led to mathematics. When I discovered uncanny links to Alice and *her* world, I decided I had to follow. Down the rabbit hole.

A friend of mine said it was like reading the first half of one book and the second half of a completely different book. It's true in a way. There's a strong demarcation between the parts. They are opposites. Adventures, reflections. Positive, negative. Discrete, continuous. Day, night. Left brain, right brain. But they also link together. The second part bends back to the first. Somebody ought to make a list of books that seem to bend back on themselves. I think Malcolm Lowry saw *Under the Volcano* as a wheel-like structure. And in *Finnegans Wake* we're meant to go from the last page to the first. In different ways I've done this myself. *Great Jones Street* bends back on itself in the sense that the book is the narrator's way of resurfacing. *Players* begins in darkness with an unidentified voice talking about motels. This is Lyle's voice, and the book ends with Lyle in a motel room in Canada, in blinding light. In *Ratner's Star*, Softly, who is a sort of white rabbit figure, leads Billy into the hole that will take him back to the beginning of the book. In Chapter One Billy had a bandage on his finger—the finger he cut near the end of the book.

LeClair: In *Ratner's Star*, in a much-quoted passage, you refer to a class of writers who write "crazed prose" and books that are not meant to be read. Is *Ratner's Star* in that category?
DeLillo: No it isn't, although I think I felt some of the pull of crazed prose. There's an element of contempt for meanings. You want to write outside the usual framework. You want to dare readers to make a commitment you know they can't make. That's part of it. There's also the sense of drowning in information and in the mass awareness of things. Everybody seems to know everything. Subjects surface and are totally exhausted in a matter of days or weeks, totally played out by the publishing industry and the broadcast industry. Nothing is too arcane to escape the treatment, the process. Making things difficult for the reader is less an attack on the reader than it is on the age and its facile knowledge-market. The writer is driven by his conviction that some

truths aren't arrived at so easily, that life is still full of mystery, that it might be better for you, Dear Reader, if you went back to the Living section of your newspaper because this is the dying section and you don't really want to be here. This writer is working against the age and so he feels some satisfaction at not being widely read. He is diminished by an audience.

LeClair: Do you think about your readers?
DeLillo: I don't have a sense of a so-called ideal reader and certainly not of a readership, that terrific entity. I write for the page. My mail tells me nothing useful about what might be out there in the way of readers. It comes in driblets, much of it from crazy people.

LeClair: Do you think they feel they have a sympathetic correspondent? There are crazy people in the backgrounds of your books.
DeLillo: Yes, they've crept in. The streets are full of disturbed people. For a long time I wondered where they were coming from, so many, at once. We now learn they've been let out of asylums and hospitals and into halfway houses and welfare hotels. I've always thought New York was a medieval city and this is another sign of that. They speak a kind of broken language. It's part of the language of cities, really. In *Players* these people are always talking to Pammy. They talk to Diana in *The Engineer of Moonlight*. In the subway arcades under Fourteenth Street you hear mostly Spanish and black English with bits of Yiddish, German, Italian, and Chinese, and then there's this strange broken language. The language of the insane is stronger than all the others. It's the language of the self, the pain of self.

LeClair: Is obsession necessary to create fiction that's better than pedestrian?
DeLillo: Obsession is interesting to writers because it involves a centering and a narrowing down, an intense convergence. An obsessed person is an automatic piece of fiction. He has a purity of movement, an integrity. There is a kind of sheen about him. To a writer, an obsessed person is *right there*. He is already on the page.

When it comes to writers being obsessed, I have one notion. Obsession as a state seems so close to the natural condition of a novelist at work on a book that there may be nothing else to say about it. It's not possible to say whether an obsession can drive someone to do better work. He's probably not obsessed. If he is obsessed, it's probably beside the point.

LeClair: How do you prepare to write?
DeLillo: By doing nothing. Keeping life simple. Giving ideas time to sort themselves out. I try to be patient. Time usually does the selecting for me. What I'm left with at the end of a given period is usually what I need to begin.

LeClair: What about the actual mechanics?
DeLillo: In the beginning I work brief shifts. The important mechanics are mental. A lot of mental testing goes on. Promising threads develop out of certain ideas or characters, and some of these lines reach almost to the end of the book, or out into infinity, since the book doesn't have anything resembling an end at this point. Other lines are very short. Again, most of this is mental. It's stored. Some things I'll take right to the machine. Writing is intense concentration, and the typewriter can act as a focusing tool or memory tool. It enables me to bore in on something more strongly. It also enables me to see the words being formed. What the words look like is important. How they look in combination. I have to see the words.

Past the early stages I work longer periods. I find myself nearing the end of certain early lines of thought. This represents progress. It reminds me that the work doesn't actually go out into infinity. These identical, shapeless, satisfying days will come to an end somewhere down the line.

LeClair: There's some very abstract spatial analysis of characters or situations in your fiction. Would you comment on its function?
DeLillo: It's a way to take psychology out of a character's mind and into the room he occupies. I try to examine psychological states by looking at people in rooms, objects in rooms. It's a way of saying we can know something important about a character by the way he sees himself in relation to objects. People in rooms have always seemed important to me. I don't know why or ask myself why, but sometimes I feel I'm *painting* a character in a room, and the most important thing I can do is set him up in relation to objects, shadows, angles.

LeClair: Does place have any effect on your composition?
DeLillo: Sometimes things insinuate themselves onto the page. When I was working on *Great Jones Street*, there was dynamiting going on all the time, and eventually these construction noises turned up in the book. But

place has more important meanings. So much modern fiction is located precisely nowhere. This is Beckett and Kafka insinuating themselves onto the page. Their work is so woven into the material of modern life that it's not surprising so many writers choose to live there, or choose to have their characters live there. Fiction without a sense of real place is automatically a fiction of estrangement, and of course this is the point. As theory it has its attractions, but I can't write that way myself. I'm too interested in what real places look like and what names they have. Place is color and texture. It's tied up with memory and roots and pigments and rough surfaces and language, too. I'm interested in what mathematicians say. No matter how pure their work is, it has to be responsive to the real world, one way or another, in order to keep its vitality and to cleanse itself of effeteness and self-absorption.

LeClair: Would you comment on your play *The Engineer of Moonlight*? It seems to be a distillation of many of the ideas and voices in your fiction.
DeLillo: We talked earlier about people in rooms. The play is just that. People talking, people silent, people motionless, people juxtaposed with objects. There are four characters. What connects them is the awesome power of their loving. The main character is Eric Lighter, a once-great mathematician who is now a pathetic but compelling ruin. If the play has a line of development at all, it hinges on whether Eric's former wife will abandon a recent marriage and successful career to help the others transcribe and type Eric's half-insane memoirs, along with other day-to-day chores and obligations. The idea is absurd on the face of it. Diana ridicules the notion. Toward the end of the play she leaves the stage still denying that she'll stay. But we know she still feels a powerful love for Eric, for the aura of greatness that clings to him, and we feel uncertain about taking her at her word. The suggestion that she may stay is contained in a strange board game she'd played with the others earlier in Act Two. A game involving words and logic used in unfamiliar ways. If we take this game as a play within the play, what we see is that Diana, who has never played before, gradually comes to understand the strange and complex nature of the game—an understanding the audience doesn't share. Toward the end she is elated; she is saying it all begins to fit, the colors, the shapes, the names. She wants to play.

A Talk with Don DeLillo

Robert Harris / 1982

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During the last 11 years Don DeLillo has published seven novels of wit and intelligence. He has examined advertising (*Americana*, 1971), football (*End Zone*, 1972), the rock music scene (*Great Jones Street*, 1973), science and mathematics (*Ratner's Star*, 1976), terrorism (*Players*, 1977), the conventional espionage thriller (*Running Dog*, 1978) and, in his new novel, *The Names*, Americans living abroad.

Yet despite his unusual versatility and inventiveness, it seems that relatively few readers other than the critics clamor for Mr. DeLillo's work. He is able to earn a living from his writing, but he has not had a large commercial success.

"I don't know what happens out there," he says. "I don't know how the machinery works or what curious chemical change has to take place before that sort of thing happens. I wouldn't speculate. I've always tried to maintain a certain detachment. I put everything into the book and very little into what happens after I've finished it."

Mr. DeLillo lives with his wife on a modest residential street in a suburb of New York City. One recent afternoon, Mr. DeLillo sat in his living room wearing a plaid shirt, blue jeans and moccasins, and discussed his past and present concerns as a writer.

Born in the Bronx in 1936, Mr. DeLillo attended Fordham University, where, he says, "the Jesuits taught me to be a failed ascetic." He hated school but readily reels off a list of early influences. "I think New York itself was an enormous influence," he says. "The paintings in the Museum of Modern Art, the music at the Jazz Gallery and the Village Vanguard, the movies of Fellini and Godard and Howard Hawks. And there was a comic anarchy in the writing of Gertrude Stein, Ezra Pound and others. Although I didn't necessarily want to write like them, to someone who's 20 years old that kind of work suggests freedom and possibility. It can make you see not only writing but the world itself in a completely different way."

Mr. DeLillo's new novel explores how Americans work and live abroad. The protagonist, James Axton, a "risk analyst" for a company with C.I.A. ties, becomes obsessed with a bizarre murderous cult whose members select their victims by their initials. Mr. DeLillo describes *The Names*, along with *Ratner's Star*, as a book that was especially difficult for him to write.

"The main character," he says, "resisted realization for a longer time than other characters have. It wasn't until I went away for five or six months without doing any work on the book that James Axton came alive for me. Before that, he seemed to resist entering the sentences I was writing. And every time I began to write about the cult I seemed to enter a period of anxiety. I'm not sure whether this was because I was having trouble bringing the cult members to life or whether I simply didn't want to face the reality of what they did. I wasn't sure I could be equal to the mysteriousness of the murders they committed.

"A writer can be perfectly happy with the character he creates who happens to be a mass murderer if the writer feels that his creation has been successful. But in this case, it simply didn't work that way. The characters themselves made me wish I'd decided to do a simpler novel."

Like *Ratner's Star*, a book in which Mr. DeLillo says he tried to "produce a piece of mathematics," *The Names* is complexly structured and layered. It concludes with an excerpt from a novel in progress by Axton's 9-year-old son, Tap. Inspiration for the ending came from Atticus Lish, the young son of Mr. DeLillo's friend Gordon Lish, an editor.

"At first," Mr. DeLillo says, "I had no intention of using excerpts from Tap's novel. But as the novel drew to a close I simply could not resist. It seemed to insist on being used. Rather than totally invent a piece of writing that a 9-year-old boy might do, I looked at some of the work that Atticus had done when he was 9. And I used it. I used half a dozen sentences from Atticus's work. More important, the simple exuberance of his work helped me to do the last pages of the novel. In other words, I stole from a kid."

Young Atticus is given ample credit in the book's acknowledgments, but creative borrowing from life is not a new technique for Mr. DeLillo, who has been praised for his ear for dialogue. "The interesting thing about trying to set down dialogue realistically," he says, "is that if you get it right it sounds stylized. Why is it so difficult to see clearly and to hear clearly? I don't know. But it is, and in *Players* I listened very carefully to people around me. People in buses. People in the street. And in many parts of the book I used sentences

that I heard literally, word for word. Yet it didn't sound as realistic as one might expect. It sounded over-refined even."

For three years while writing *The Names* Mr. DeLillo lived in Greece and traveled through the Middle East and India. "What I found," he says, "was that all this traveling taught me how to see and hear all over again. Whatever ideas about language may be in *The Names*, I think the most important thing is what I felt in hearing people and watching them gesture—in listening to the sound of Greek and Arabic and Hindi and Urdu. The simple fact that I was confronting new landscapes and fresh languages made me feel almost duty bound to get it right. I would see and hear more clearly than I could in more familiar places."

Living abroad also gave Mr. DeLillo a fresh perspective on the United States. "The thing that's interesting about living in another country," he says, "is that it's difficult to forget you're an American. The actions of the American Government won't let you. They make you self-conscious, make you aware of yourself as an American. You find yourself mixed up in world politics in more subtle ways than you're accustomed to. On the one hand, you're aware of America's blundering in country after country. And on the other hand, you're aware of the way in which people in other countries have created the myth of America, of the way in which they use America to relieve their own fears and guilt by blaming America automatically for anything that goes wrong."

Critic Diane Johnson has written that Mr. DeLillo's books have gone unread because "they deal with deeply shocking things about America that people would rather not face."

"I do try to confront realities," Mr. DeLillo responds. "But people would rather read about their own marriages and separations and trips to Tanglewood. There's an entire school of American fiction which might be called around-the-house-and-in-the-yard. And I think people like to read this kind of work because it adds a certain luster, a certain significance to their own lives."

The writer to whom Mr. DeLillo has most often been likened and for whom he has great respect is Thomas Pynchon. "Somebody quoted Norman Mailer as saying that he wasn't a better writer because his contemporaries weren't better," he says. "I don't know whether he really said that or not, but the point I want to make is that no one in Pynchon's generation can make that statement. If we're not as good as we should be it's not because there

isn't a standard. And I think Pynchon, more than any other writer, has set the standard. He's raised the stakes."

Mr. DeLillo also praises William Gaddis for extending the possibilities of the novel by taking huge risks and making great demands on his readers. Yet many readers complain about the abstruseness of much contemporary writing.

"A lot of characters," Mr. DeLillo says, "have become pure act. The whole point in certain kinds of modern writing is that characters simply do what they do. There isn't a great deal of thought or sentiment or literary history tied up in the actions of characters. Randomness is always hard to absorb."

Mr. DeLillo believes that it is vital that readers make the effort. "The best reader," he says, "is one who is most open to human possibility, to understanding the great range of plausibility in human actions. It's not true that modern life is too fantastic to be written about successfully. It's that the most successful work is so demanding." It is, he adds, as though our better writers "feel that the novel's vitality requires risks not only by them but by readers as well. Maybe it's not writers alone who keep the novel alive but a more serious kind of reader."